

West Bank - Settlers Expelled This Palestinian Family From Its Village. Then the Terror Began All Over Again

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Terrified of settlers, a Palestinian shepherding family fled its village in the South Hebron Hills after the war started. They relocated with their sheep but found no relief in their new haven. Last week, one young man was hospitalized after being attacked by armed, masked settlers



Jibril Samamri, left, with his father Fares, near Shuweika where they've taken refuge. The attackers took off Jibril's belt and whipped him with it, he recalls. One of them held a dagger to his throat and said, "If you come near here one more time, we'll kill you." Credit: Alex Levac

The villagers thought they had found a safe haven. When violent settlers – under cover of the new war in the Gaza Strip and their newly donned emergency-squad uniforms – became even more violent and unrestrained, the terrified shepherds from Zanuta had decided to give up and abandon their homes. Even these hardened, sun-seared shepherds are afraid. They left the village of their birth, the lands on which they pastured their sheep and the landscapes of their childhood, moving to the outskirts of a city. For two weeks, they moved their meager belongings, dismantled the tents and tin huts, the animal pens and the troughs and mangers, and rebuilt them on the edge of Shuweika, a suburb southeast of Dahariya, in the South Hebron Hills. They thought they were secure.

But the settler thugs had different ideas. Armed and bellicose, their long reach extended to the villagers' new home, which turned out to be a false haven. Somewhat like [Gazan refugees](#), who thought they had fled to safety in Rafah but soon found themselves in a new hell, the pastoral refugees of the South Hebron Hills have also discovered in the past few weeks that there is no safe place for them on their land and on their soil.

The inventory of the horrific damage wrought in Gaza is incomplete without adding the recent devastation in the West Bank. [The settlers are exploiting the dark pall cast by the war](#) to intensify the terrible population transfer in the South Hebron Hills, the Jordan Valley and elsewhere. The settlers' aim is to cleanse the land, or at least some of it, of its indigenous population. And there is

no one to stop them, it seems.

A long and dusty trail ascends to Shuweika. The new refuge here is about 4 to 5 kilometers away from Zanuta, the village the shepherding community left on October 30, some three weeks after the war erupted. Within two weeks, their new hamlet outside the city was standing. The 27 families, some 250 souls, had scattered every which way. Ten families, among them the Samamris, settled here, near Shuweika (not to be confused with the village of the same name next to Tul Karm).

The village of Zanuta, in the South Hebron Hills. Credit: Moti Milrod

The father of the family, Fares Samamri, greets us in the arched tin hut he created here as a diwan, a social gathering spot. The 57-year-old has 18 children by two wives. Two of his sons, Nassar and Jibril, 19 and 21 years old, respectively, are sitting with us. Nassar is wearing a white shirt emblazoned with the inscription, in Hebrew and Arabic, "Singing in the same voice, painting in the same language" on the front; the back reads, "You and I will change the world." He says he got it from his aunt, who lives in Israel. Jibril, who is wearing a black Calvin Klein jersey, was brutally beaten by settlers last Friday.

Zanuta lies opposite Meitarim Farm, run by [Yinon Levi, the target of U.S. sanctions for his extreme violence](#). Fares tells us his family fled Zanuta "because of the army, the settlers and Yinon Levi." During the war's first weeks, settlers attacked them until the fear of the children and the women, and the panicking of the sheep, became too much to bear. The settlers terrorized the flocks with their drones, causing the ewes to miscarry as they fled; they blocked the shepherds' paths to their homes; prevented them with force and threats from taking their animals to pasture; and, of course, seized and denied access to the Samamris' land, including their olive grove.

Fares was concerned about his sons' possible responses to those acts. "If a settler slaps me, I restrain myself, but they are the type to react, and that worried me," he says.

The Shuweika enclave was quiet at first. But the settler outpost of Yehuda Farm and its large animal pen loomed across the valley, a distressing omen. It didn't take long before the shepherds became acquainted with their new neighbors. The terror of Yehuda Farm replaced the terror of Meitarim Farm. The number of sheep moving about in the new locale dropped, both because of the settler attacks and because the shepherds, deterred by the threats, shut the animals up in the pen most of the day.

Sheep that were accustomed to pasturing in Zanuta's fields are now closed in and crowded together. They're taken out every day for a short walk to the well and back. Some 50 head of the original flock of 300 have died. In any event, their owners don't have access to veterinary services - animals that trip and fall, breaking a leg as they try to run from the drones, are usually doomed. Miscarriages are increasing.



Fares and Nassar Samamri, in Shuweika. Credit: Alex Levac

"They [the settlers] want to force us to do away with our sheep," Fares says. "That way we will stop

being shepherds and find work in Dahariya, so they will be able to take over all our lands. With the sheep, we venture out onto the land and they want to stop that.”

In the past few weeks, whenever anyone dared to take the sheep out of the pen, a drone appeared, soaring about and instilling fear. In Zanuta, settlers had launched drones some 15 times a day; here it's only once a day, but that's hard to take, too. On one occasion, a settler named Elyashiv, the community's new nemesis, showed up and said: “There's no Palestine. There's only Israel. Everything belongs to us. Nothing belongs to you.” Elyashiv is usually uniformed and accompanied by five or six armed settler-soldiers, primed to frighten and sometimes attack.

We once encountered Elyashiv, wearing an army uniform. He stopped his car on a dirt trail near us. He spoke and behaved in a thuggish, deprecating manner, though undoubtedly less brutally than the way he deals with helpless shepherds who have no one to protect them and their property.

In the second-most recent incident, in late February involving this community, Elyashiv, masked and in uniform, showed up with five of his cohorts while members of the Samamri family were with their flock near their small olive grove in the valley. The settlers handcuffed Fares and Nassar and beat them; Fares still has a scar on his knee. The settler denied that he was Elyashiv, introducing himself as “Captain Yehuda.” But Fares replied, “I know you from your eyes.” Fares then called the police and field researcher Nasser Nawaj'ah, from the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem. Nawaj'ah immediately arrived in order to record the incident. The assailants told the police that Nassar had thrown stones at their drone. He denied it, and the incident ended inconclusively.



The Shuweika enclave was quiet at first. But the settler outpost of Yehuda Farm and its large animal pen loomed across the valley, a distressing omen. It didn't take long before the shepherds became acquainted with their new neighbors. Credit: Alex Levac

The settlers returned last Friday. At about 6 P.M., Jibril – who was alone – took the sheep to the well on the slopes of the valley, some 300 meters from the family's new home. After they finished drinking, the flock kept milling around. In the past, the settlers often came to evict them by force from their well, but generally the shepherds saw them coming and left in time.

This time, five or six settlers arrived from the rear, from the direction of Zanuta, without Jibril noticing. They ascended from the wadi, traveling in a white Toyota pickup with yellow Israeli plates. They wore civilian garb, armed with machine guns, one of them holding a dagger. Three of them wore green T-shirts reading Hashomer Yo'sh (Judea-Samaria Guard), or something similar. Four men got out of the car, grabbed Jibril and started to hit him with their rifle butts, pummeling him with their fists and kicking him. He collapsed but they continued beating him mercilessly.

This went on for about four minutes, Jibril says. He managed to call his father before the settlers stole his cellphone, which still hasn't been returned.

Most of the blows were to his head and face. One eye was still swollen when we saw Jibril on Monday; the bruises on his head were still visible. The attackers took off his belt and whipped him with it, he recalls. One of them held the dagger to his throat and said, “If you come near here one

more time, we'll kill you."

His father, mother and brother quickly arrived. On the way they saw the settlers driving off, but at that point they didn't know that Jibril was lying on the ground, bleeding. "They broke me," he said to his father, still sitting on the ground.



Fares Samamri. "They took everything from us, nothing's left," he says. He admits that he cries when he's here and sees the remnants of Zanuta across the way. Credit: Alex Levac

Jibril was taken home and he waited there for the police to come and see his wounds. Police officers did in fact arrive, but first asked the villagers who had gathered to disperse. The officers filmed Jibril and told his family to file a complaint quickly. After the police left, the family took Jibril to the clinic in Dura, a city southwest of Hebron. He was transferred from there to Princess Alia Hospital in Hebron where he stayed overnight for tests before being discharged the next day. His body still aches, he tells us.

The next day the Samamris filed a complaint at the police station in Kiryat Arba, the urban settlement abutting Hebron. "In the wake of a complaint that was submitted on Sunday, an investigation was launched which is in its initial stage," an Israel Police spokesperson informed Haaretz this week. It's safe to say that the investigation will be in its initial stage for a long time.

We all proceeded to the well. A rocky road flanked by thorny vegetation leads up from their homes, and another descends to the well on the slopes of the valley. The settler outpost of Mitzpe Eshtemoa lies across the way. To its left is Yehuda Farm, then the Meitarim industrial zone. The Samamri family's small olive grove and the remains of the village where they once lived are also visible from here.

Fares sits down on a rock. "They took everything from us, nothing's left," he says, as though to himself. He admits that he cries when he's here and sees the remnants of Zanuta across the way. But only when he's alone.

Gideon Levy and Alex Levac

P.S.

• Haaretz. Jun 8, 2024:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/twilight-zone/2024-06-08/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/settlers-expelled-them-from-their-village-then-the-terror-began-all-over-again-again/0000018f-f67e-d84e-adbf-f77f421e0000>